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ABSTRACT

A psycholinguistic approach to listening was used in this study of listening skills in second language (L2) acquisition. The study tried to identify and classify the problem-solving processes and strategies used by L2 listeners. The processes were categorized from a perspective that took into account the processes underlying their use rather than their product or linguistic outcome. Immediate retrospection was used to analyze the listening processes of five native American speakers in an advanced Italian class. In three sessions each, the students listened to original Italian radio broadcasts of interview, news, and commercial material. A certain degree of overlap was observed in the listening problems, planning processes, and strategies. It is suggested that students need help in acquiring the listening skill in a foreign language and that students should be taught listening comprehension through planning processes and strategies that are activated by the presence of specific problems. It is concluded that the psycholinguistic approach is an example of the growing emphasis on process rather than product, and of teaching ways of processing linguistic information. Contains 23 references. (LB)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LISTENING STRATEGIES OF ADVANCED LEARNERS Of ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Introduction

The difficulty in exploring the listening process and the assumption that learners develop the listening skill naturally are the reasons for a lack of investigation of the listening skill in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Of the four skills, listening is perhaps the most difficult for learners. Because the rate of presentation of auditory information is not controlled by the listener and because the aural message is not presented as it is in reading, L2 listening comprehension can be a highly complex experience. Hypotheses that the listener makes are constantly being tested, and the listener, unlike the reader, cannot return to a text and reprocess the given information.

In normal situations of communication, the listener can ask the speaker to reiterate or to clarify what was said, but this is not the case when the listener has no control over the rate and manner of delivery, as for example when listening to a radio broadcast or to a speech in L2. Because of these limitations, the investigation of the mental operations involved in listening has been difficult and challenging for reasearch.

The ability to understand the spoken word has traditionally

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been considered a passive coding skill. However, recent psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research in speech reception and comprehension has provided empirical evidence that listening is a complex operation which consists of active processes and strategies. In fact, in extracting meaning from spoken discourse, the listener completes several cognitive steps.

With the advent of cognitive theories of SLA, research has moved from the linear analysis of linguistic products, to a psycholinguistic study of the underlying processes particularly in the areas of reading (Rummelhart, 1980; Carrell, 1982, 1983; Steffensen et al., 1984; Clark, 1980; Block, 1986; Hosenfeld, 1977, 1984) and writing (Zamel, 1982, 1983; Raimes, 1985) . The implications of this new paradigm can have an important impact also upon the way we conceptualize a language area such as L2 listening.

Significance of the Study

Contemporary literature raises the theoretical and methodological problems of L2 listening (Corder, 1982; Ellis, 1986; Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 1983). Listening is so difficult to describe because it is a covert activity. Therefore, researchers must rely on introspective data to understand what happens in the subjects' brain when an aural message is processed.

The focus of the current study was to use a psycholinguistic approach to listening. In other words, this investigation tried to identify and classify the problem-solving processes and

strategies used by L2 listeners. These processes and strategies were taxonomized from a process-oriented perspective, that is, by taking into account the processes underlying their use rather than their product or linguistic outcome.

Pedagogical Implications of This Study

Pedagogically it is assumed that by developing a taxonomy of the strategies employed by skillful (DeFilippis, 1980) or more proficient (Murphy, 1985) listeners, it is possible to use such a list to instruct poorer listeners to use them also. This belief is based on the assumption that such strategies lead to higher proficiency. Further investigation is actually needed to determine whether the best strategies can be taught to poor listeners, and how one might proceed to effect some change in their behavior. It should be determined for example, if the purpose of such instruction should be integrated with listening instruction or if it should form a separate part of classroom activities. These are the issues that need to be addressed in the area of strategy training.

The argument of teaching strategies is that strategic knowledge is part of what must be learned in order to solve problems in listening. On the other hand, if students learn the strategies on their own through discovery methods, they will acquire a more active approach to problem solving. This approach may be applied to other kinds of listening tasks.

Since prior research has put little emphasis on the

listening process, this study has attempted to add knowledge to processes leading to L2 listening comprehension.

Specific research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. What problems do advanced learners of Italian experience in listening comprehension?
2. What planning processes do they activate to select a strategy?
3. What strategies do these learners use to solve listening comprehension problems?

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms adopted in this study are the ones provided by Faerch and Kasper (1980, 1983, 1984) which are the most widely accepted and discussed in the literature. In this study the terms 'process' and 'strategy' are not used interchangeably. Process, more specifically, planning process, and strategy are considered as two separate operations of intellectual behavior (see Table I). Faerch and Kasper (1983) make a distinction between planning and execution of intellectual behavior and they place strategies in the planning phase, more precisely within the area of the planning process and the execution process. In fact, Faerch and Kasper (1983) distinguish between "the process of devising a strategy and the strategy resulting as a product of such mental activity" (p. 30). The theoretical and definitional distinction suggested by Faerch and Kasper is applied to the current investigation.

Method of Data Collection: Immediate Retrospection

While reading, writing, and speaking skills have been examined introspectively in a number of studies, and a fairly sophisticated introspective methodology has been developed to investigate processes in these areas, only a few exploratory studies (DeFilippis, 1980; Martin, 1982; Murphy, 1985) of listening have come to the attention of this researcher.

Because of the internal nature of the listening process, it is evident that any study of this subject should consult the language learner. A research method using introspection is thus the most suitable in gathering information about the listening cognitive processes and strategies. In fact, Faerch (1984) suggests to investigate how listeners solve receptive problems not by relying on methods based on production (e.g. recall and reaction time) rather by trying to design introspective procedures that can shed light on listeners' receptive techniques.

This investigator used immediate restropsection as a method of analysis of listening processes. Immediate retrospective reports have been defined in the literature as verbalizations "given by the subject immediately after the task is completed" (Ericsson & Simon, 1984:19). In the specific case of the current study, subjects reported their thoughts not at the completion of the entire listening task, rather after each self-selected interruptions of the aural stimulus, so that the verbalizations would not intefere with ongoing processes.

Subjects were asked to listen to the selection, to stop the recording any time they wanted, to briefly explain what they understood, and to verbalize the thoughts running through their minds while listening. In particular, subjects were instructed to produce immediate retrospective protocols by using Ericsson and Simon (1984) level three of verbalization. This form of verbalization involves an explanation of thought processes. Specifically, it requires a link between information present in Short Term Memory and "earlier thoughts and information attended previously" (p.79). By letting the subjects take intermittent breaks during the listening task and by self-selecting the moments when their oral responses were ready to be expressed, this researcher was able to record responses while the participants' thoughts were still in the process of formation.

Although listening to the stimulus several times does not present a natural situation, it was used to obtain information about the processs and strategies that the consultant used. In order to minimize losses of information due to forgetting, the participants were encouraged to stop the tape as often as needed and to describe what comprehension problems they experienced, how they planned to solve them, and what strategy they selected to understand the meaning.

Subjects

The present study was a case study conducted on five advanced learners of Italian as a foreign language in a total of

fifteen sessions, three sessions for each subject. The subjects were limited to American native speakers. The participants were selected on the basis of their language proficiency level in order to rule out the possibility that their choice of listening processes and strategies might be influenced by their proficiency level in the target language.

Tasks

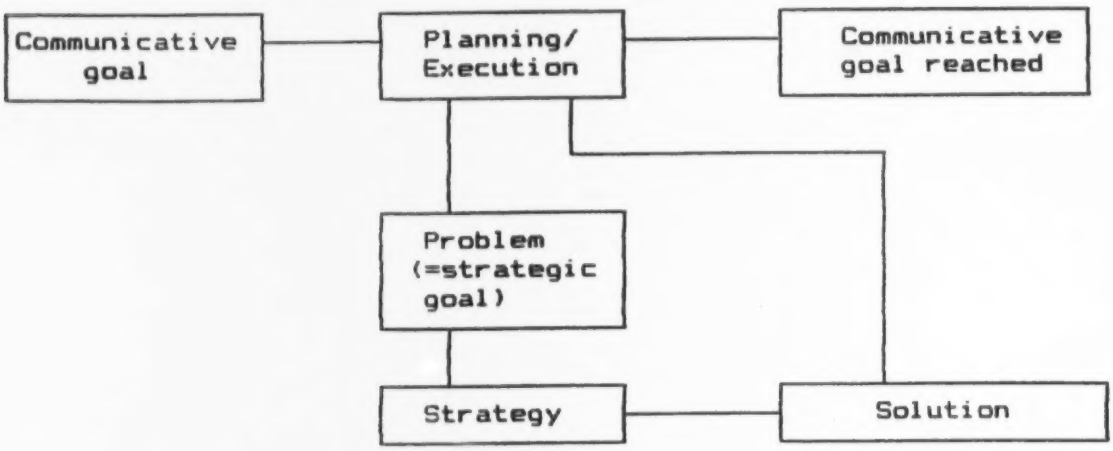
In selecting the tasks for the current study, this researcher adopted problem-solving tasks that were used as stimuli to induce subjects' listening processes and strategies. In order to control the threats of external validity, a listening task that closely resembled real life situations was chosen, Natural spoken Italian, rather than simulated or commercial listening selections was used. Since radio listening provides a natural, authentic context, the stimuli were taped from original Italian radio broadcasts. For the purpose of this study, the oral stimulus was limited to a series of short content message of three kinds: interview, news, and commercials of a total of 10 minutes each.

The Coding Procedures for the Immediate-Retrospective Verbal Protocols

The verbal protocols in this study were analyzed by using Faerch and Kasper's (1983) model of intellectual behavior of determining problem-solving processes and strategies. This model was originally designed for communication strategies; however, it

was adapted to listening comprehension in non-interactive situations.

Communicative and strategic goals



(Faerch & Kasper, 1983:33).

This model has been adapted to listening comprehension in the following way:

LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

Perceived Problem	Planning Process	Selected Strategy	Solution
Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV

In this model of intellectual behavior, Stage I involves the identification of a specific comprehension problem; Stage II represents the formulation of an hypotheses about a solution path, in other words, in Stage II subjects devise a strategy; Stage III is the product of the preceeding mental activity, the operation selected to solve the problem. Stage IV represents the reached comprehension.

TABLE I

PROBLEMS	PLANNING PROCESSES	STRATEGIES
Unknown word/ familiar topic Known word / no connection to the topic	Comprehension – gathering	–Contextual inferring –Seeking confirmation/ reflecting wrong hypothesis –Using background knowledge –Associating –Using cognates
New word Known word\ several meanings Numbers Proper names Word heard wrong Known word translated wrong Known word/ unfamiliar topic	Linguistic Processes	–Selecting –Vocalization/ visualization –Using cognates
Unknown word/ familiar topic Known word / no connection to the topic	Word Meaning and Main Topic Connecting Processes	–Contextual inferring –Seeking confirmation/ rejecting wrong hypothesis –Using background knowledge –Associating

Results

This researcher recognizes a certain degree of overlap in the listening problems, planning processes, and strategies listed below. Also, in a normal listening task they are interrelated and can occur simultaneously.

After analyzing the data, this investigator labelled a total of nine problems, three planning processes, and seven strategies.

Definitions of the listening problems, planning processes, and corresponding strategies, as illustrated in Table I, follow.

Problems

1. New word: subjects hear a new word.
2. Numbers: subjects have problems in understanding numbers.
3. Proper names: subjects cannot recognize proper names of places and people.
4. Words heard wrong: subjects hear words wrong and create a new word.
5. Words heard right/translated wrong: subjects hear known words, but translate them wrong.
6. Words with several meanings: subjects hear known words which have several meanings.
7. Known words/unfamiliar topic: subjects hear known words, but are unfamiliar with the topic.
8. Unknown words/familiar topic: subjects hear unknown words, but are familiar with the topic.
9. Known words/no connection with the topic: subjects understand the words but cannot make connections with the main topic.

Planning Processes

1. Comprehension-gathering processes: they lead to strategies that try to get the meaning of the text.

2.Linguistic processes: they select strategies that try to understand specific linguistic items.

3. Word meaning/main topic connecting processes: they activate the choice of strategies that try to establish relationships between word meanings and the main topic.

Strategies

1. Contextual inferring: subjects focus on the overall or particular context to derive a conclusion on the main idea or the meaning of unkown words or phrases.

2. Seeking confirmation/rejecting wrong hypotheses: subjects seek confirmation to their hypotheses at both word and idea level by looking at the particular or general context.

3. Using background knowledge: subjects draw from previous knowledge and experience about the topic.

4. Associating: subjects connect new thoughts and information to previous content.

5. Selecting: subjects focus on important language items and disregard what is judged as irrelevant information or information that does not fit into the perceived context.

6. Vocalization and/or visualization: subjects repeat the word or phrase they hear or visualize the spelling of the language item.

7. Using cognates: subjects relate an L2 word to one having the same root or meaning in English or in another language that they

know. This strategy was often employed to get the meaning of new words.

Implications for a New Direction in L2 Listening Instruction

Students need help in acquiring the listening skill in a foreign language. Teachers rarely assist students while they are in the process of constructing meaning from a listening task. Without guidance, many listeners acquire strategies that do not lead to correct comprehension.

One implication of this study is the need to investigate a psycholinguistic definition of listening, in other words, to focus upon the process of listening. The data reveal that listening comprehension consists of planning processes and strategies that are activated by the presence of specific problems.

These three stages are closely interrelated, therefore, it would not make sense to break the process down into a series of isolated problems or strategies. A critical pedagogical implication of the study is that the listening strategies presented in this report ought not to be taught discretely, but that they should be presented as interweaving components of a single language process.

This investigator believes that knowing the strategies without the cognitive operations leading to those strategies, can be irrelevant. Good listeners' strategies when mechanically applied as formulas by any learner to any situation, may not

produce the expected successful results because there is no understanding of the thinking processes underlying those strategies.

This researcher suggests that teachers help students recognize their strategies, strengthen them, and generate new ones. Learners need to participate in activities that help them examine what the listening process entails and they need to explore this process by themselves. Once their exploration of the process has been initiated, they need to be guided in the use of alternative strategies for listening.

Teachers may stress the metacognitive dimention in the strategy training. In other words, they may promote metacognitive discussions (self-awareness of strategy use) that encourage students to talk about their listening problems and the strategy used to solve them. This includes discussing when, how, and why they choose certain strategies. During these strategy discussions, teachers can provide practical examples in real listening situations and lead students to realize what listening strategies could be used.

This researcher suggests also to teach students how to use immediate-retrospective techniques. As students produce immediate-retrospective reports, the teacher has an opportunity to diagnose listening difficulties and identify specific listening strategies. It is recommended also that teachers help students compare and contrast the various problem-solving processes used and identify those that are most successful.

Furthermore, listening processes and strategies can be taught either inductively or deductively in individualized forms of instruction where the teacher engages in one-to-one interaction with the learner.

Classroom listening instruction is usually limited to what preceedes or follow the listening tasks (e.g. introduction of new vocabulary and discussion of a topic). Teachers could help students while they are in the process of constructing meaning by proceeding in the following way: (1) have students listen to a brief segment; (2) ask students to identify language items that were perceived as problems; (3) discuss what planning processes could be activated; (4) select what strategies could be successful to solve those problems. This sequence -listening, identification of problems, discussion on planning and execution- can be used with several segments.

With self-discovery process techniques and appropriate strategy training, less competent listeners should be able to apply successful problem-solving processes to a variety of listening tasks.

Conclusion

The psycholinguistic approach is an example of the growing emphasis on process rather than product. Traditional teaching and research stressed product defined as the right answer, the terminal behavior. The new approach, on the contrary, is more interested in ways in which listeners cope with comprehension

problems.

This approach to the teaching of listening is psycholinguistic because it does not teach students the language. In other words, it does not involve the acquisition of linguistic knowledge such as new words, new grammar, or expressions, but rather it teaches ways of processing linguistic information.

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